



## The American Wake

TEARS were rolling down Evelyn's face as she filled the kettle. She knew she only had a few minutes to gather herself before Peter would be down the stairs. After clicking the button she went back to the frying pan. It was bulging with sausages, rashers, white and black pudding. She'd ignored his protests that he could grab something at the airport. There was no way he was leaving this house without a good breakfast inside him and God only knew how long it would be before she'd get to cook for him again. With that thought, the lump in her throat swelled and she tried to roadblock the tears with her eyelids – but to no avail. His enthusiastic footsteps made her jump and dry her eyes quickly.

“Ah, Ma. You didn't have to do this... Can I have a fried egg?”

Peter kissed her on the cheek then sat at the table to check his paperwork for the tenth time. As Evelyn looked at him, memories of him sitting at that table over the years came flooding back.

The first day he'd sat there instead of in his high chair, barely able to see over the table. He managed to cover it, and himself, with bits of carrot and mince from his bowl of stew, but Evelyn didn't care.

The Christmas Day he got the mini snooker table – they'd had to eat with their plates on their knees for about six weeks afterwards; he refused to move it. But it was the best present he'd ever had and he still talked about it. He never knew that Evelyn had borrowed from a money lender – it was the first Christmas after Peter's Dad had left them and she was determined he'd have what he asked for.

He had sat at the table struggling with his maths homework in primary school and again when he was in secondary school. He was always terrible with numbers and there were tears of frustration when he tried to study for the exams.

Sitting in exactly the same place, he had opened the letter confirming the job offer in Boston six weeks previously and Evelyn had cried that day too.

“Ma, MA, my egg will go hard!”

Evelyn turned back to the cooker and took up the breakfast. Peter made tea and they sat at the table.

*‘One last time,’* she thought to herself.

“What time is your taxi booked for?”

“Plenty of time. Another couple of hours yet. Are you sure you don't want to come? You can just get another one back.”

“Ah no love, you go on. Sure I'd be like an eejit trying to find a taxi after you're gone.”

“You'll have to come and see me. When I get my own place. I'll probably have to stay with Jack for a while, but when I have me own apartment you can come.”

They chatted away for another half hour, making plans that would never come to pass and promises that would be impossible to keep.

A ring on the doorbell made them both jump.

“Your taxi is very early. He better not charge you.”

“He won’t charge me!” Peter was determined as he walked to the door.

Evelyn knew immediately that it was not the taxi driver and started to clear the table, presuming it was one of his mates coming for a last goodbye. After a minute or two, however, the voices at the door grew louder and she could sense that it was not a positive conversation.

Evelyn peeked out the kitchen door and saw a man who was vaguely familiar. A wave of recognition swept over her and she dropped what she had in her hand. The noise made Peter run to her and the visitor followed him.

The next thing she knew she was on the sofa and Peter and his Dad were standing in front of her, arguing.

“Stop, stop it. Just stop it.” Evelyn stood up and the men fell silent.

“Martin, what do you want? What are you doing here? You’re not welcome.”

“I just came to say goodbye to my son. I won’t stay and I wouldn’t still be here if you hadn’t made such a fuss.”

Peter was about to jump to Evelyn’s defence, but she stopped him.

She looked at her husband for the first time in more than 10 years. He was thin and gaunt, like someone who had been living on the street and had borrowed a bigger man’s clothes for the visit.

“I just wanted to wish my boy well. I’ve been keeping an eye on you over the years Peter and I heard you were heading off today. I just didn’t want to miss my chance to... to say goodbye.”

“Your son? Your boy? I haven’t been your boy since I was nine. If you’ve been keeping an eye on me you’ve been doing a crap job. The only one who’s been keeping an eye on me is Ma.”

“I don’t want to cause trouble. I’m not staying, I just wanted to say goodbye.” As he said the words he looked as if he was going to faint. Instinctively Peter and Evelyn grabbed him and led him to a seat.

“I’ll get you some water.” Evelyn walked to the sink and Peter followed her.

“I’m not going.” Peter was speaking in urgent whispers. “I’m not leaving you with that mad man. I don’t even know if it *is* me Da. He could be some nutter.”

“He is your Da; and you are getting on that plane if I have put you in a taxi and take you to the airport

myself. You are not wasting five minutes of your life on him.”

Evelyn gave Martin a drink of water.

“Do you want some tea? There’s a bit of fry there if you’re hungry.” Evelyn’s default position – when in doubt feed somebody.

“No I’m grand, I’ll have my water and go. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause trouble.”

“My taxi will be here soon and I’m not getting into it ’til you’re gone out of this house.”

“Once I’ve had my drink I’ll be gone son.”

“DON’T call me that.”

After a few minutes the doorbell rang again. They all stood in the garden until the tut-tutting of the taxi driver eventually encouraged Peter to put his bags in the boot. He hugged Evelyn for what seemed like an eternity, but it was not long enough for her and she lost the battle with her tears again.

“I don’t want to go ’til he’s gone Ma.”

“Get into that taxi or I’ll box your ears.”

They laughed and cried and then they laughed again.

Peter turned to get into the taxi and stopped. Evelyn had brought him up too well to turn his back on Martin, no matter how much he hated him, so he put his hand out and Martin grabbed it.

“Thank you. Thank you, Peter. Goodbye and good luck.”

“I don’t want to hear you were at this door again.”

“I won’t be, I promise.”

Another long hug for his Ma then Peter was in the taxi and gone.

Evelyn and Martin watched their son’s taxi drive away until it completely disappeared, then they stood for another few minutes; motionless and silent.

Without looking at him, Evelyn spoke to Martin. “How long have you got?”

“Six months maybe. The doctors reckon it could be more if I sort myself out a bit.”

“Can I do anything?”

“No. You’ve already done everything Evelyn. He’s a grand young fella.”

Martin started to walk away.

“I can help, let me help.” Evelyn couldn’t stop herself.

“I made a promise to that lad and for once I’m going to keep it. Goodbye Evelyn. I’m so sorry.”

Evelyn watched Martin walk away and as her heart broke for her son, she was shocked to find that

there was room in it to break for Martin too.

She mourned them both for a very long time – her saving grace knowing that at least one of them would be back.